

Angling for Dolores

Nick Norwood

My best friend Pick's got a wife. That son of a bitch. Her name's Dolores. Dolores the Magnificent, I call her. She's almost as tall as Pick: five foot nine, maybe ten. A true Amazon. Pretty girl: soft features, brown hair, graceful muscular arms. And legs! She calls me Little Peter, or Li'l Pete, which I guess is apropos, since I'm not but in the five foot six and three quarters range. Me and Dolores get along swimmingly, though, and like to hang out together. She works out at the paper mill and tells me about some of the burning issues women discuss in the break room: Not!

Dolores talks about fishing. Period. And she by-god knows her stuff, because when she and Pick aren't in a knock-down drag-out war—which they are about 50 percent of the time—he takes *her* fishing instead of me. Good old Pick. But the fact is, Dolores is a better noodler than Pick. Better form I think.

And that's what's got me in deep shit over Dolores—because of this one time Pick decided to take both of us fishing, and I got to watch her work. We were at the local reservoir. Pick and I remained in the boat while Dolores went down on a routine noodle. A week earlier, they'd planted a pair of boxes ("artificial nesting habitats") in a hot spot and knew they'd have a fish. Dolores was in a Day-Glo orange bikini. It was so bright that just before she dove in you could see the reflection of it on top of the water. I know you could see the reflection because while she was standing there in Pick's johnboat—after she shimmied out of her cut-off shorts and the bikini bottoms were sort of riding up on her

cheeks—how I know is, Pick and I were sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, side-by-side, right behind her, and I was keeping *extremely* intent on keeping my head down and my eyes on something other than Dolores's bikini bottoms (knowing that if Pick caught me ogling Dolores's moon he might, say, impale me on his forearm like a mudcat) and there it was, that reflection on top of the dark green-colored water: you could even see how the suit was riding up on her cheeks, forming two perfect partial eclipses. And then she dove in and you could see it glowing orange underwater, the two pieces of her swim suit. You could see it glide down to the bottom like a pair of redfish doing one of them synchronized swimming deals, the only thing in the green water visible to the observer, which was me, sitting in the boat beside Pick.

Then the swim suit jerked like two live wires. A storm of bubbles rose to the surface and Pick started grinning. "Didn't get but a little one," he said. "Might go ten pounds. If she's lucky."

Dolores was already cussing when she got to the top: "Goddamn this silly goddamn orange Day-Glo son of a bitch! It scared off the damn fish!"

And then, ladies and gentlemen, she did something that changed my life. She pulled that damn Day-Glo orange bikini off and threw it in the boat, leaving her body parts uncovered. Naked as hell, ladies and gentlemen! And even though she was still underwater and couldn't be seen, it was just the *idea* of it, of her complete nakedness, of her (excuse my language) nudity. . . . I was suddenly changed. A changed man, folks. I ain't shitting you one bit. I began to tremble all over. I tried not to look in the water for fear she'd rise up out of it and I'd just faint dead-away. So I looked in the boat, but right there staring me in the face was that damn Day-Glo orange bathing suit and the bra parts were

pooched out where her (excuse my language) breasts had been. Oh, goddamn! I had to look somewhere else, so I just pointed my eyes straight up—at God, ladies and gentlemen. Hell, what would you do?

Then Dolores went back down, and in a minute she came to the top with a fish she'd grabbed out of the other box, slung it over the top, and said, "Li'l Pete, I'm about to climb in the boat." Which, of course, was a warning for me to turn my head the other way. But I might as well have been looking, because every movement she made sort of defined itself through that flimsy little aluminum boat hull: when it listed over a little to one side I knew Dolores was climbing up, and I could see in my mind's eye what she must have looked like, could see her bare (here comes that word again) breasts rising up over the gunwales. Oh, goddamn! Then, while I was still looking the other way, I could feel the boat rock a little as she stepped into her bikini bottoms, sort of ungraceful like but in a real cute, sexy kind of way, and then I could hear the elastic waistband snapping as she pulled it up over her womanhood, then the elastic legbands snapping as she covered her cheeks, those perfect lunar surfaces: I could see it all, ladies and gentlemen, every bit of it, as clear as if I'd been looking, as clear as from me to you! I'm changed, I tell you. Changed!

Dolores rides a motorcycle: a '49 Indian, fully restored, leather saddle bags, wide tires, pearl paint job, and chromed plumb out. A lot of people think it's a Harley-Davidson and say dumb things to her, like, "Hey, nice Harley," and she tells them, in that sweet-sarcastic way she has, "I wouldn't piss on a Harley-Davidson if the son of a bitch was on fire." And that lets them know, in a friendly way, that they don't know anything about motorcycles.

Dolores comes to pick me up at my double-wide. We go get us a

six-pack, head off to the woods. Sit around shooting the shit. Talk about fishing. I'll be in there and I'll hear this sort of deep-throated rumbling noise, and then I'll know it's Dolores. So I'll just get straight up from there and go outside and climb on the back of her Indian. It's got a little butt-pad passenger seat mounted on the rear fender and it's just the right size for my butt. Dolores will be standing over the bike, straddling it, wearing her tight, flared Levi's and a real clingy T-shirt and her Vietnam-era jungle combat boots, and after I climb on, she'll goose the accelerator one more time, and Boom! Off like a pair of screaming by-god banshees! I have to hold onto the fender to keep from falling off: mud and road tar get splattered on my fingers, but it's the only alternative to hanging on to Dolores, putting my arms around her mid-section, because if Pick saw me doing that he'd probably tear my head off and shit down my neck—his favorite thing to threaten me with. Besides, I'd look pathetic, don't you think, hanging on to a woman like that? It's called dignity, ladies and gentlemen. You got to get you some.

But anyway, this is all ancient history of the recent past, me palling around with Dolores. After the Day-Glo orange bikini incident, I decided that even though Pick was my best friend, he wasn't, after all, nothing but a scum dog son of a bitch and if I wanted Dolores there wasn't no real good reason why I shouldn't just go on and go for it. I decided it was time for me to act. For once in my by-god life it was time for me to do something. I don't think it was the bikini alone that did it: that bathing suit was just what they call a catalyst. It shocked me into this revelation I had, the way I felt when she slung it off, the way I wanted to just lay down in the bottom of that flatbottom johnboat and just cry, just blubber like, say, some damn pathetic fool or something. I knew

right then I had to do something about it or my life would be a senseless waste of good material.

I began to make a plan. What my plan was: I'd wait until Pick did something stupid like, say, let it get heard around town how he got drunk and went home with some flimsy little beer maid and him and Dolores would get in a violent not-no-police-action kind of war. And I'd just sit home and wait for the sweet rumbling sound of her '49 Indian.

I didn't have to wait long. Three days, count 'em, not but three days after the Day-Glo orange bikini incident, Pick slept over at flimsy, little old Janice Roxley's house and let everybody in town hear about it. Bragged about it, that dumb son of a bitch. I headed home soon as I heard him shooting off his damn mouth, because I knew it wasn't long until Dolores would know all about it too. It even struck me that Pick *wanted* her to hear about it. That dumb son of a bitch. But anyway, here she came, rumbling along, revving that engine. We got us some Millers and headed for the woods. She drove us out to a little fish pond me and her and Pick had just a week earlier got through dynamite blasting (another one of our favorite fishing techniques). She parked us right on the edge of it, in the shade of some willow trees, in a place where it was kind of damp.

So, here it is: this is my big moment, the time when I'm going to take charge of my destiny. First, I have two beers to sort of buff up my courage, cause it's going to take some doing to get this out of my mouth, I'll tell you right now it is. Dolores has been going on for several minutes about what a lowdown stupid shit son of a bitch Pick is. Now, she's quiet, has her jungle combat boots resting on the butt pad, her head laid back, and is just trying to take it easy. It's my time, and I know it.

"Dolores," I say, "I'm glad you brought me out here today. There's something I've been meaning to say to you, and don't stop me because I'm going to say it right now." (I have to say it all at once like this just to get it to come out, I have to just sort of explode out with it.)

"Little Peter, what the hell are you talking about?" she says.

I get choked up and can't speak, open my mouth but only grunting can seem to come out.

"Li'l Pete, are you going to choke to death?" she says.

And then I do the big-balled-est thing I've ever done in my life, for just a second here I feel like a by-god stand-up man of action. And I just reach right over and kiss Dolores right on the cheek. I make it as sweet as you ever seen, ladies and gentlemen, just right there, plant it right smack-dab on her cheek, and say, "Dolores, Pick didn't nothing but a scum dog son of a bitch."

What happens: Dolores looks at me like I'm something she never considered could even exist in the world. I can tell it's taking her just a second to think about what has just transpired between us. And I'm thinking, Pete, you lucky son of a bitch, you've done it, you've got her, she's yours.

And then, what happens is, I reach over to kiss her again, and what happens, Dolores reaches up and grabs me by the back of the neck and shoves me over, head-downwards, face-first, into the wet, soggy muck on the edge of that fish pond. And then she starts laughing like I've just told the funniest redneck joke she's ever heard. And then I hear her say, "Pete, you dumb little fucking pervert. That's why I love you so much. You're weird. You're a pretty good actor, too, Pete. For a second there you had me going."

And then I don't know how to act—at all—and so I just lay here

a minute.

And then Dolores does something I really can't explain. What she does: she climbs on her big Indian and cranks that bad boy up, that loud randy-assed son of a bitch.

"That's a good one, Pete," she hollers out over the engine noise. "You little fucking pervert! I can't wait to tell the girls in the break room tomorrow!"

And when I finally get my face up out of the mud all I can see is tail-pipe, tail-light, and Dolores's hair streaming behind her. She just left me there, knowing I'd have to walk all the way back to town. On foot. Walking.

And how it is with me, crouched down on the edge of this fish pond: I've got muck all over my face, in my eyes and ears and mouth, in my nose. It tastes like spoilt tuna, and it smells like, I'll never forget it from now on, it smells like about a whole lifetime's worth of dead, rotten, stinking fish.

Well, needless to say, it was not a pleasant walk back home. Covered in gooey, fish-smelling pond muck. It's all in my hair, all over my clothes. I think some of the orifices in my head might be packed with it. I've got some mossy seaweed-looking stuff hanging down from my shoulders and I'm so depressed I don't even bother to remove it. It's a dirt road I'm on, deep in the woods, and I pick up a stick to defend myself from the larger varieties of mosquito we have here in the Deep South. My spirits are dragging ground like the tits on a pregnant dachshund. It sort of gives a general slumpingness to my posture, so that I'm a goo-incrusted, seaweed-shaggy, muck-faced, slumping, Creature-from-the-Black-Lagoon-looking boy, trudging down a dirt road, through the deep woods of the Deep South, trying to defend myself from B-52 mosquitoes with a walking stick—with the specters of a failed roman-

tic quest and just a generally failed, fucked-up life hanging over my head—and waiting for me, maybe around the next corner, whenever I reach town, sometime real soon, is the promise of a good old country ass whuppin at the hands of one Pick Thomas. That long-sideburned son of a bitch.

I felt it was time for serious reflection.

So what I do is, I dig right in to the archaeology of my love life, as I'm walking along, *slop, slop, slop*, along that dirt road. It doesn't take much digging. Scraping the surface will put you clean through to the other side. There was a cute girl in junior high named Harriet Nussbaum. I had a sweet little thing going with her. But at the time I was busy with my project for an upcoming social studies fair and couldn't devote myself, fully, to her attentions. As a result she was swept away by a ninth grader named Doug Witherspoon, a star on the junior high track team who wore three sets of ankle weights wherever he went and had calf muscles the size of a Yule log.

After that, when I *was* in high school—well, as you may have gathered, I wasn't exactly the Big Man On Campus, though I was the football team mascot and Special Assistant to the Equipment Manager—I used to get to ride on the team bus when we went to football games and the players would all run their fingers through my hair for good luck. I was the first one off the bus and I'd stand there just outside the door, while the rest of the team and the coaches had their heads bowed down in prayer, praying for touchdowns and field goals and quarterback sacks; and when the players came down the steps and out of the bus—yelling things like "Let's kick ass!" and "Kill the bastards!"—I'd be standing right there and they'd run their fingers through my hair, tousle my head, just ruffle my feathers all up, and *whoop! whoop! whoop!*

some more. It's pretty much common knowledge I'm responsible for our class-IA district football second-place finish my senior year. All that good luck they got from rubbing my head.

But one time, after a successful campaign against the Mansfield Marauders, the players were so pumped up they sort of offered one of the cheerleaders as a gift to me. A sweet, little freshman named Cynthia Bramble. Sweet, Sweet Cynthia I called her. Some of the linemen picked her up, carried her over to my seat, and just dropped her right in my lap. Through no fault of hers or mine, her bloomed butt landed right on the palm of my hand. She screamed and all the football players laughed, but I was in love with her for some months after that. I used to try to call her on the phone, but someone else in her family always answered and told me things like, "Cynthia has come down with a strange, unpronounceable disease and may die any minute. She can't come to the phone." I stayed in love with her through Christmas, but when school resumed after the break I learned she was pregnant and had eloped with one of those same linemen that dropped her in my lap. Three marriages later, she is now the proud mother of a junior-varsity tight end, two fine young junior high cornerbacks (twins), and a pee-wee league third-down-and-long defensive specialist.

Since high school, I have maintained my sanity through auto-eroticism.

And there it is, ladies and gentlemen, the complete history of my romantic involvements. That is pretty much it. Except for the part about how my failed romances led to the psychological process Freud called sublimation, wherein I used my exponentially frustrated sexual energy in the pursuit of catfish, alligator gar, and big-mouth bass. Short and sweet, but oh so sad.

Anyhow, this is what I'm reflecting on as I walk down this dirt road, locked in mortal combat with U2-spy-plane-type mosquitoes, sneaky bastards that infiltrate your undershorts and leave welts the size of a nickel. But as I'm thinking about this, it dawns on me that there is a definite conclusion to be drawn from this: women want a man of action and will not stand for a substitute, no matter how sensitive, caring, and understanding he may be. Let him be a lying, flatulent, uneducated brute of a wool-hound: as long as he's a man of action he is to be desired. My problem all along has been that I'm too intellectual and sensitive for my own good. I thought to myself, What I need to do is to by-god go demand me some pussy! I've got my needs and I've got my rights. I'm being discriminated against! I thought, I ought to march into town right this goddamned minute, call the American Civil Liberties Union, and demand they secure my constitutional right to drop bait in the womanhood of America!

But then, as is so often the case with me, my intellect took over. Didn't I just try the direct approach? I asked myself. Didn't she just pore-pack my face with pond muck? Hell, what are you—stupid? You've got to get her attention first, make her want you, get her good and by-god lathered up, or you can just as well forget it.

And then it occurred to me, ladies and gentlemen, as it no doubt has already occurred to you, the way I could both become a man of action and gain the woman I so desired: challenge Pick Thomas to a fist-fight and then pile drive his ass.

A bold and daring ambition, to be sure. But, hell, I had to ask myself, who knows more about Pick Thomas's weak spots than me? Nobody. That nose-haired son of a bitch. All I had to do was wait for the right time and place, then windmill his ass, in a way that would guarantee he'd stay windmilled.

Hmm. . . . Maybe that is kindly a tall order after all. I mean, with the element of surprise and the right equalizer—like, say, an ax handle or a piece of lead pipe—I thought I had a pretty good chance of taking him. But keeping him took was a different matter.

What to do. . . .

What to do? Oh, hell, ladies and gentlemen, let's skip it. It's a damned old existential question anyway. And you and me both know damned well there ain't no getting to the bottom of them. As I write you this, I am laid up in the Bi-regional Hospital of Our Lady of the Woolen Smock, over here outside of Corsicana. I've got a broke leg, a broke arm, a broke coccyx (I'll let you look it up), and my jaw is wired shut tighter than an alligator on methamphetamines. What happened? Well, *duh*. Pick Thomas windmilled *my* ass is what happened. What the hell did you expect? Whipped my ass till my nose bled (hence the coccyx issue). Then did the limb damage. Then tossed me in the Dipsy Dumpster outside the bait shop, with the other dead bait and what-not. Dignity, you ask? Ha-ha, very funny. You ought to take that show on the road. You're quite a damned comedian, aren't you? Maybe someday you'll have a run-in with a redneck like Pick Thomas, hopped up on vengeance, dead set on whuppin ass. We'll see who's laughing then.

But anyway, I can't fool with y'all no more. I've got a date. That's right. Dolores is coming to see me. Fact, I think I hear the sweet rumblings of her '49 by-god Indian right now. See, she feels guilty about how I got my ass whupped out of desire for her. Her coming to see me is kind of a pity deal. But, hey, when you're not a man of action, but instead an intellectual like me, you've got

to take what you can get. And that's my word of wisdom for you, ladies and gentlemen, what I've learned from this here incident: in fishing and in love, there ain't nothing to do but go on and take whatever you can get, however you can get it.